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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing graduation requirements and the limited vocational offerings in rural schools, many rural high school students still enroll in vocational education courses. This study examined factors influencing the decisions of rural Ohio high school students to select vocational education courses. In spring 1988, an interview and questionnaire were administered in 8 rural Ohio high schools to 105 sophomores who intended to enroll in vocational education courses in their junior year. Subjects were 55% male and 97% white; 76% lived with both parents. Chosen vocational specialties included agriculture (21%), business (19%), and trade and industry (15%). Thirty percent planned to attend joint vocational schools, and this decision was related to lower socioeconomic status and lower grade point average. The primary reasons for selection of vocational education were job preparation (58%) and enjoyment of vocational subject matter and learning environment (52%). Plans to attend joint vocational schools were related to positive perceptions of such schools. Parents, friends, and relatives had supported the vocational decisions of 47% to 59% of students, with encouragement focusing on increased job opportunities provided by vocational preparation and on the fun, easiness, or challenge of vocational courses. Friends and parents made discouraging comments to 34% of students, mostly related to attending joint vocational schools. This paper contains 9 statistical tables. (SV)

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# Vocational Education: An Attractive Alternative for Rural Youth?

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# Vocational Education: An Attractive Alternative for Rural Youth?

## INTRODUCTION

An increase in high school graduation requirements intensified the need to better understand the reasons why rural public high school students participated in vocational education. Approximately 30 percent of the school age population were enrolled in rural high schools, and rural schools comprised roughly 75 percent of all the schools in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1981). Despite the additional graduation requirements and the limited vocational offerings in rural schools, many students still enrolled in vocational education courses.

Only limited information was available concerning factors influencing rural public high school students to participate in vocational education. The lack of studies addressing this issue, especially in the rural setting, and the conflicting findings indicated a need for research to be initiated.

## PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to identify issues related to the decisions of Ohio tenth-grade rural public high school students to participate in vocational education. The specific objectives of this study were:

1. To determine the reasons Ohio students selected vocational education courses in comprehensive and joint vocational schools (JVS).

2. To determine who encouraged or discouraged Ohio students to choose vocational education courses.

3. To determine the individual and school characteristics of Ohio students.

## PERSPECTIVE/METHODS

A face-to-face interview and a questionnaire were administered in the spring of 1988 to a randomly selected sample of 105 Ohio rural students who planned to enroll in vocational education courses during their junior year. A panel of experts, university faculty, school personnel, and graduate students established the content validity of the open-ended questions used in the interview and the questionnaire used to acquire the individual and school characteristic information. The questionnaire utilized previously established valid and reliable

questions from previous national longitudinal studies, High School and Beyond (HS&B) and the National Survey of Labor Market Experience-New Youth Cohort (NLS).

## Data Source

Fifty-two high schools were identified as rural high schools in Ohio. Eight of these schools were randomly selected for the present study. One-hundred-twenty sophomore students, 15 from each school, were randomly selected. These students intended to enroll in vocational education in their junior year. One-hundred-five students were present with parental permission slips the day of the interview.

# RESULTS

## Findings: Objective One

Job preparation ranked as the number one reason (58%) why Ohio students enrolled in vocational education courses. Enjoyment of vocational subject matter and the environment in which the vocational education courses were taught ranked second (52%). Other reasons to enroll in vocational education courses included personal reasons, monetary benefits, perceived ease of grades, attraction of affiliated youth organizations, preparation for education beyond the secondary level, positive prior experiences with vocational teachers, and contacts with individuals in vocational trades (see Table 1).

Ohio students who planned to attend joint vocational schools in their junior year perceived their future schools favorably, whereas those students who planned to enroll in vocational education courses at their home schools perceived joint vocational schools negatively (see Table 2). Positive comments included: expectations that the new environment and students at joint vocational schools offered exciting and positive changes; joint vocational schools provided the ideal settings for students' educational needs; and enrollment in the joint vocational schools did not eliminate participation in home school activities, therefore students enjoyed the benefits of both institutions (the home school and the joint vocational school). Opposing comments centered around the negative image of joint vocational schools, the concern of being viewed as a vocational student, the perception that a better education was available at the home school, and the fear of leaving long time friends and familiar environments.

Table 1

Ohio Tenth-Grade Rural Public High School Students' Reasons to Enroll in Vocational Education Courses (n=105)

| Rationale | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Preparation for a job | 61 | 58.1 |
| Enjoyment of vocational subject matter and laboratory environment | 54 | 52.4 |
| Personal | 22 | 21.0 |
| Easy course | 19 | 18.1 |
| Affiliation with a youth organization | 14 | 13.3 |
| Other reasons | 54 | 51.5 |

Note. Some individuals provided more than one response to this question.

Table 2

Ohio Tenth-Grade Rural Public High School Students' Comments about Joint Vocational Schools (n=105)

| | Comments about the JVS | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Junior year school | Positive | | Negative | | None | | Total | |
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| JVS | 58 | 55.2 | 6 | 5.7 | 1 | 1.0 | 65 | 61.9 |
| Home school | 2 | 1.9 | 27 | 25.7 | 11 | 10.5 | 40 | 38.1 |
| Total | 60 | 57.1 | 33 | 31.4 | 12 | 11.4 | 105 | 100.0 |

## Findings: Objective Two

Parents encouraged and/or supported 59% of the Ohio students' decisions to enroll in vocational education courses (see Table 3). The second and third most encouraging and/or supporting groups were friends (49%) and other relatives (47%). Encouraging comments centered around the following beliefs: vocational education provided students with better job opportunities after graduation; vocational education was fun, easy, and/or challenging; and changes in the school environment (students leaving the home high school to attend joint vocational schools) benefited the students.

Friends and parents provided discouraging comments about vocational education to 34% of the Ohio students (see Table 4). Over 80% of the negative comments were about joint vocational schools. Negative comments focused on joint vocational schools having bad reputations and the belief that a better education was offered in the non-vocational courses at the home comprehensive schools.

## Findings: Objective Three

Slightly more males (55.2%) than females (44.8%) appeared in the sample (see Table 5). Ninety-seven percent of the Ohio students were white. Most students (76.2%) lived with both parents (see Table 6). Twenty-one percent of the students in the sample perceived agriculture as their vocational specialty. Nineteen percent of the Ohio students perceived business and 15% perceived trade and industrial as their vocational specialties (see Table 7). Thirty-five percent of the Ohio students did not choose a vocational specialty. The average number of pupils in the sophomore class was 74 (range = 36 - 107). An average of 30.4% (range = 11.1% - 58.9%) of Ohio students intended to enroll at joint vocational schools in their junior year (see Table 8).

A significant difference in the level of SES and two components of SES, father's occupation and family income, was found between Ohio students who planned to enroll at joint vocational schools their junior year and those students who planned to complete higher proportions of vocational education at comprehensive schools. Students going to the joint vocational school their junior year came from families with a lower SES rating than those students who planned to complete high proportions of vocational education at comprehensive schools. In addition, students planning to attend the joint vocational school had lower actual GPA's than students who planned to remain at their home schools their junior year. No other significant differences were noted in the Ohio tenth-grade rural public high school data base (see Table 9).

Table 3

Individuals Who Supported or Encouraged Ohio Tenth-Grade Rural Public High School Students' Decisions to Enroll in Vocational Education Courses (n=105)

| Individuals | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Parents | 62 | 59.0 |
| Boy/girl friend(s) | 51 | 48.6 |
| Relatives - brothers/sisters, uncles/aunts, cousins, and grandparents | 49 | 46.7 |
| Teachers | 17 | 16.2 |
| Counselors | 19 | 18.1 |
| Coaches | 1 | 1.0 |

Note. Some individuals provided more than one response to this question.

Table 4

Did Anyone Discourage Ohio Tenth-Grade Rural Public High School Students to Enroll in Vocational Education Courses? (n=105)

| Were students discouraged? | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 36 | 34.2 |
| No | 66 | 62.9 |
| Undecided | 3 | 2.9 |
| Total | 105 | 100.0 |

Table 5

Race and Gender of Ohio Tenth-Grade Rural Public High School Students (n=105)

| | Gender | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Males | | Females | | Total | |
| Race | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Blacks | 1 | 1.0 | - | - | 1 | 1.0 |
| Whites | 56 | 53.3 | 46 | 43.8 | 102 | 97.1 |
| Other | 1 | 1.0 | 1 | 1.0 | 2 | 1.9 |
| Total | 58 | 55.2 | 47 | 44.8 | 105 | 100.0 |

Table 6

Parental Situation of Ohio Tenth-Grade Rural Public High School Students (n=105)

| Characteristic | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Lived with both parents | 80 | 76.2 |
| Lived with only mother | 17 | 16.2 |
| Other arrangements | 8 | 7.6 |
| Total | 105 | 100.0 |

Table 7

Vocational Specialties of Ohio Tenth-Grade Rural Public High School Students (n=105)

| Characteristics | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Vocational specialty | | |
| Agriculture | 22 | 21.0 |
| Business | 20 | 19.0 |
| Health | 6 | 5.7 |
| Home economics | 2 | 1.9 |
| Trade & industrial | 16 | 15.2 |
| Marketing | 2 | 1.9 |
| Not reported | 37 | 35.2 |
| Total | 105 | 100.0 |

Table 8

Ohio Tenth-Grade Rural Public High School Class Size and JVS Enrollment (n=105)

| School | Class size | JVS enrollment | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | n | % |
| 1 | 68 | 8 | 11.2 |
| 2 | 102 | 25 | 24.5 |
| 3 | 50 | 8 | 16.0 |
| 4 | 86 | 12 | 14.0 |
| 5* | 42 | 23 | 54.8 |
| 6* | 107 | 40 | 37.4 |
| 7* | 102 | 60 | 58.9 |
| 8 | 36 | 4 | 11.1 |
| Total | 593 | 180 | |
| Average | 74 | 23 | 30.4 |

* These schools did not offer vocational education beyond the tenth-grade.

Table 9

Differences in Characteristics for Onio Tenth-Grade Rural Public High School Students (n=105)

| | Type of school that students planned to attend when juniors | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | JVS (n=65) | | Home school (n=40) | | |
| Characteristics | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | t-value |
| Perceived GPA | 2.36 | 0.81 | 2.68 | 0.56 | 1.74* |
| Actual GPA | 1.87 | 0.64 | 2.31 | 0.75 | 2.90* |
| Father's occupation | 21.82 | 14.71 | 34.34 | 19.11 | -3.23* |
| Mother's occupation | 31.16 | 21.54 | 37.96 | 21.98 | -1.20 |
| Father's education | 1.78 | 0.77 | 2.13 | 0.90 | -1.84 |
| Mother's education | 1.88 | 0.76 | 2.06 | 0.62 | -1.14 |
| Family income | 1.60 | 0.76 | 2.11 | 0.74 | -2.21* |
| SES | -0.13 | 0.65 | 0.27 | 0.59 | -2.80* |
| TV hours per week | 12.14 | 10.82 | 12.84 | 15.24 | -0.26 |
| Absenteeism | 8.78 | 7.35 | 6.95 | 5.76 | 1.31 |
| Self-esteem | 26.94 | 2.85 | 26.68 | 2.54 | 0.46 |

* Statistically significant at an alpha level $\leq$ 0.05.

The critical value of t is + or - 1.65 (df=103) for one-tail test.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Objective One

Job preparation was ranked most often as the reason why respondents enrolled in vocational education, but students also enrolled in vocational education for reasons other than job preparation. Students who selected joint vocational schools viewed them favorably and those students who elected to remain in their home schools viewed joint vocational schools negatively. Students wanted association with schools that were perceived to be positive in nature. Students did not speak negatively about their school choices, as they wanted others to believe they made the correct decisions of where to attend school.

### Objective Two

Parents, close friends, and other relatives were the dominant individuals who supported and/or encouraged the respondents to choose vocational education courses. The three groups of individuals based their views upon current and past experiences and perceptions of vocational education. Parents influenced their children's decisions and children were eager to share their parents positive statements.

Slightly over one-third of the respondents received discouraging remarks about vocational education and most of these remarks indicated the bad image of joint vocational schools. The choice of attending a joint vocational school was often equated with receiving a inadequate education.

### Objective Three

The majority of Ohio students were white. Ohio students did not take advantage of the six vocational education specialties. Variations in the percentages of students attending joint vocational schools existed

Students going to the joint vocational school their junior year had lower GPA's and came from families with a lower SES rating than those students who planned to complete high proportions of vocational education at comprehensive schools.

## SUMMARY

Rural public high school students believed that enrollment in vocational education would help them acquire jobs, yet not prevent them from attending college. Students anticipated success in upper division high school vocational education courses because they had previously experienced success in vocational courses, liked the vocational teachers, attraction of affiliated youth organizations, and enjoyed the subject matter. Students enrolled in vocational education courses at the home school felt a sense of belonging. When compared to home school vocational students, students attending joint vocational schools were significantly lower in ability and SES. Parents, close friends, and other relatives were the dominant individuals who supported and/or discouraged the respondents to choose vocational education courses.

## POINT OF VIEW

### Objective One

Vocational educators should emphasize in their recruitment efforts that some students enroll in vocational education courses for reasons other than job preparation. The discrepancy between reasons for enrollment in vocational education and current definitions of vocational education need to be researched. Vocational educators and policy makers need to realize that the image problem of joint vocational schools is associated with its separation from the home schools.

### Objective Two

Directing recruitment efforts at parents may have a high degree of success. Parental images associated with vocational education last a lifetime. Images, both positive and negative, are being created, shared, and embedded daily. Therefore, efforts to portray a positive image of vocational education to parents should be a goal of vocational educators.

Some people equate vocational education with only joint vocational school courses and not vocational education courses at the comprehensive high schools. The proliferation of the dual education system is enhanced by the separation of specialized vocational education at joint vocational schools.

## Objective Three

Further investigation is needed to understand the variations in the percentage of students attending joint vocational schools. Vocational students appear to segregate according to SES and ability levels. Placing vocational and academic education on separate campuses proliferates the image that vocational education is for lower ability persons. John Dewey (1913) warned against a dual education system as he felt it would accentuate class divisions both in and out of school. It appears that Dewey was right.

## IS VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AN ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVE FOR RURAL YOUTH?

Many unanswered questions remain, but these 105 rural students felt that vocational education provided them with an appealing option during their high school career. The answer appears to be yes, vocational education is an attractive alternative for some (30% average vocational enrollment in joint vocational schools in this study) rural students.

Paper presented as a part of the "Educational and Career Plans of Rural Students" symposium at the Midwest Educational Research Association Meeting, Chicago, IL, October 1989.